

Wish You Were Here by [curiositydoor](#)

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Summary:

The weirdest part wasn't even that they battled a monster from another dimension and lived to tell about it. No, Jonathan thought, the weirdest part was what happened afterward.

He and Steve became friends. And he and Nancy barely spoke to one another.

1. The Same Old Fears

Author's Note:

This was my first attempt at writing about Stranger Things a while back, so it's filled with all the clichés: nightmares, my take on the new camera, mixtapes, sweaters, you name it. Except Steve isn't a jerk, Jonathan's pretty happy since Will is back, and Nancy feels alone in her suffering. It's not related to this story* at all (that will have a different interpretation of events), except for the way I understand the characters.

* <http://archiveofourown.org/works/8529352/chapters/19552207>

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Notes for the Chapter:

12/28/16: Finally have some time to make edits! The plot isn't changing, but in my haste to develop the story, I went crazy with adverbs and focused less on the style of prose. This round of revisions is minor to the point that it may not even be noticeable, but maybe I'll end up doing an overhaul if I have the time/motivation. Chapter 1 is up.

The weirdest part wasn't even that they battled a monster from another dimension and lived to tell about it. No, Jonathan thought, the weirdest part was what happened afterward.

He and Steve became friends. And he and Nancy barely spoke to one another.

He wasn't sure how it happened, but it started the night that Steve came over to apologize, and when he returned to attack the monster. When he saved his life. Something changed between them then, and the broken camera and their fistfight and getting arrested didn't seem to matter anymore. If Will's disappearance had taught him anything, it was that he couldn't have brought back his little brother by himself. It just wasn't worth it to spend his time pushing everyone away.

On the other hand, when Will woke up, and his friends gathered around him in the hospital room, he had already sensed Nancy slipping away for good.

He had gotten his brother back, but she had failed to rescue her best friend.

Everything had been too hectic after that to worry about his complicated feelings for a girl he had known for all of one week, even if it did feel like they had grown so close in that time. Will stayed in the hospital for a few days, and the rest of them went to work rebuilding the war zone that was their house. The police chief came over to help him fix the carpet and patch the hole in the wall, while his mom painted over the giant Ouija board in the living room.

"Maybe I should keep the lights up," she had mused. "It's almost December."

Fortunately, Hopper convinced her to take them down.

Meanwhile, Jonathan volunteered for as many extra shifts at the theater as he could to pay for all the repairs and hospital bills, and he passed the hours sitting through *The Big Chill* for the umpteenth time by catching up on some of the schoolwork he had missed. That part felt especially trivial, but it also made him feel like life was returning to normal.

The first time, Steve nodded at him from across the street as he emerged from the hardware store, his arms full of supplies. Jonathan

just nodded back, but that interaction alone hinted at their newfound shared understanding.

The Saturday after Will's return, Steve stopped by the ticket booth. "Hey, how's your brother doing?"

"He's alright." He didn't feel the need to mention that Will still looked so pale, or that he often woke up the whole house with his coughing fits in the middle of the night.

"And you?"

"Fine," came his automatic reply, as if he could say anything else. He wondered why Steve was even bothering. But he was still standing there, so he felt obligated to ask, "You?"

"I'm okay, aside from the fact that I've been sleeping with a baseball bat for the past week," he admitted, and it shouldn't have been funny, but they laughed at the absurdity of it all.

After a pause, Steve shot him a grave look. "She's been having a lot of nightmares. I'm not really sure how to help her."

"I don't know either," he answered.

"I just thought...maybe it would help if we all talked about it." Jonathan could read the skepticism on his face, this conversation proving that he was not much of a talker.

"Yeah, maybe."

A group of middle school girls had formed a line behind him, so Steve turned to go. "See you later, man."

"Later, Steve."

He thought about her more after that. His difficulty sleeping since Will went missing had intensified after they lured the monster to his house, and he couldn't imagine how his brother or his mom was coping. Sometimes, Jonathan laid at the foot of Will's bed; other nights, Will stayed in their mom's room. Whenever Jonathan was alone, he thought of the time he slept over at Nancy's, when she

asked him to join her on the bed, and when they grabbed one another's hands in fear the next morning. It had crossed his mind that he should be jealous of Steve, but he was just glad that she had someone there to protect her.

Another thing that had changed was that he had to drive Will everywhere. Their mom wouldn't let him bike alone, and he wondered if his younger brother was feeling suffocated, but they avoided discussing anything serious. Instead, he just listened while Will rambled on about *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns, and he kept the latest mixtape with The Clash in his car to rock out to as they rode to school or back home and, of course, to the Wheelers' house.

It only happened once, but when Jonathan rang the doorbell on a Friday night, Nancy answered.

"About ti- oh, hi!" Her narrowed eyes grew wide. "Sorry, I thought you were...um, I'll go get Will."

"It's okay, I can go down there--"

Mrs. Wheeler was standing in the kitchen, observing this exchange. "Don't worry, I'll get him," she offered with a kind nod, but he noticed Nancy's mortification for a split-second before she turned back to him. He wasn't sure what dynamic he had expected when they were finally alone together again, but it wasn't this.

"So..." she said, fiddling with a button on her coat.

"How's it going?" It was a half-hearted attempt, spared by the fact that Nancy spoke at the same time, "Sorry I haven't seen you around much."

His breath hitched in his throat. "Yeah?"

"I mean...you've seemed pretty busy since Will got back. I didn't want to bother you."

He opened his mouth but the honking of a car outside interrupted them.

"That's Steve," she stammered, as Mrs. Wheeler arrived in the

entrance hall with his little brother. Nancy's face seemed conflicted between several emotions before she slipped outside without another word.

His eyes remained on the door until he collected himself to grin at Will. "How'd it go?" He had always tried to be a good older brother, but he couldn't help but tune out as Will started explaining something about thieving goblins, preoccupied with Nancy's words replaying in his mind.

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When Will was rescued from what her brother and his friends called "The Upside Down," of course she was happy for them. But that didn't change what Eleven had said. Barb was dead, and she was never coming back. To make matters worse, her relationship with her brother had deteriorated even further as he reeled from the loss of his first love. She knew how Mike was feeling, in more ways than she cared to admit.

But she couldn't bring herself to go back to the Byers' house, even when her mom asked if she wanted to come with her when she dropped off a casserole. She already paid nightly visits in her dreams, holding a handgun or a kitchen knife or a baseball bat with nails sticking out. It didn't matter what it was. In her nightmares, just like in real life, it never worked. And she knew deep down that it wouldn't have even mattered, because none of these things could have brought back Barb.

Yet life moved on, and everyone – per the police chief's agreement or their own coping mechanisms– was trying so hard to act like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Nancy played along.

Steve surprised her with his loyalty, by how much he was trying to be a good boyfriend (they made it official sometime in late November). Sometimes, she shared Barbara's initial doubts, that he wasn't interested in getting to know the real her. Other times, it helped when he snuck over, and she could think about something else, *feel* something else besides emptiness.

He wasn't kidding about ditching Tommy and Carol. They still said

terrible things when they passed in the halls, asked her what it was like having a threesome with the psycho, but she ignored them.

She felt like he was ignoring her too, until she came to the realization that he had so much going on that he probably wasn't thinking about her at all. She prevented herself from unpacking why that bothered her even more.

Jonathan returned to school the Monday after Thanksgiving, and Steve somehow convinced him to sit with them at lunch. They didn't talk about anything of importance, so she tuned them out. It just seemed like such a huge weight had been lifted from him now that his younger brother was back, and she couldn't recognize him, couldn't relate. Whenever their eyes happened to meet, they fell back down to the table or strayed off into the distance.

She tried not to think about the events from that week. The cut on her hand was healing, and soon the thin, raised scar would be the only tangible reminder that any of it was ever real. After all, she hadn't turned into a full-time monster hunter or a ruthless killer who had avenged her best friend's death. She was Nancy Wheeler, just another suburban girl.

So she continued to bury herself in her schoolwork, and when Steve asked her to the Winter Formal, of course she said yes, because it gave her something else to focus on – even if it felt a lot less important than buying bear traps with Jonathan Byers.

Steve offered to drive her to the mall a few weeks before the dance. He wanted to get a tie to match her dress, but she hadn't even decided what color it should be.

Blue was the first color that came to her mind, and it wasn't until a few nights later that she understood why, when she woke up in a cold sweat from believing that she had been unable to escape from the Upside Down.

Blue was the first color she saw when he yanked her back through the portal, when she clung to him until their frantic breathing slowed, in sync with one another. It was the color of the striped sweater he had wrapped around her shoulders later that night, back

in the safety of her bedroom.

Maybe she should have chosen red, she thought the next day.

"Hey," Steve said, snapping her out of her reverie. They were passing by an electronics store, and he paused by the window display. "I was thinking. I want to get Byers a new camera."

"You do?" Her neutral expression belied the thoughts racing through her mind.

"Yeah. I feel like a jerk for breaking his, especially with everything going on then."

It was a nice gesture, she knew, but she couldn't help but think how long Jonathan must have saved up to buy that camera and how Steve could afford it without having worked a day in his life.

"That's a good idea," was all she said.

Steve moved to the counter to ask the clerk some questions while Nancy wandered through the aisles, flashing back to that afternoon in the darkroom. She remembered observing him, bathed in the crimson glow, and noting how focused and sure of himself he seemed as he developed the print. Red would have been a bad choice too, she decided.

As Steve settled on the newest model, she volunteered to chip in, mentioning that she had money left over from babysitting this past summer, but he waved her off. "It's not your fault I broke his camera."

Isn't it? she thought.

But he let her hold onto it until the next time Jonathan came by her house to pick up Will. Every now and then, she would take the camera out of the box and analyze the objects in her room through the viewfinder. It was stupid, but it felt like she was seeing herself through his eyes. The Tom Cruise poster was the first item to go.

"Did you give it to him?" Steve asked her again, and she shook her head.

"I haven't seen him." It wasn't a lie. He had dropped by a few times, but she hadn't been able to bring herself to go downstairs.

Somehow, the weeks flew by, the Winter Formal came and went, and she studied for and aced all her final exams before the semester ended for winter break. In light of all the recent tragedies, the entire town embraced the Christmas spirit that year. It felt like Nancy's life consisted of buying and wrapping gifts, baking cookies, and putting up decorations, so there was plenty to distract them from ever having to talk about what they all went through last month.

On Christmas Eve, her parents invited Steve over for dinner, and they were sitting on the couch when Jonathan came by to pick up Will. As he stepped into the basement, Steve asked, "Where's the camera? I'll go give it to him." He took inventory of the gifts under the tree as Nancy felt the flush creeping onto her cheeks.

"Oh! It's, um, it's in my room. I'll go get it." She ran up the stairs and hoped that Steve wouldn't say anything about her reaction. He wasn't an idiot – he must have grown suspicious of her for holding onto the camera all this time, but they didn't talk about that either.

She made it to the front door right as he was about to leave.

"I didn't get you anything. I feel bad," he added as a courtesy, but he seemed more confused than anything else.

"It's not—" She didn't know what to tell him. *It's not from me?* She settled with telling him that it wasn't really a present, and that he should just open it. And then, without thinking about it, she leaned over, pressed her hand to his chest, and kissed him on the cheek.

His surprise was evident, but she glanced down at her feet, trying to hide her own emotions before arranging her features into a friendly smile.

"Merry Christmas," seemed to be the only thing to say right then, and he and Will walked out.

When she shuffled back into the living room, Steve started talking about his parents' trip to the Caribbean for New Year's, and how they

would have his house all to themselves for a few days. Her dad was passed out in his recliner and didn't hear a thing, as always. And she had leaned her head against Steve's shoulder, but she wasn't listening either.

She was working out whether Jonathan was home and if he was using his replacement camera already. She wondered what he was thinking about it, and – with an unexpected pang somewhere behind her ribcage – she allowed herself to wonder if he was thinking about her too.

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Will helped him clear the table while his mom scooped the leftovers into Tupperware. He didn't have time to reflect on it during dinner, but once he was by himself, doing the dishes, there was nothing else to distract him.

Of course, he was happy to have a camera again. *Happy* wasn't even the right word. It felt like the final piece of himself that had gone missing that week in November had been restored.

Except now there was something new missing.

He had the impression that the camera wasn't her idea. Something about the way she described the present tipped him off, and he recalled when Steve came by their house the day before Thanksgiving.

His mom was at the store, and Will was playing games at the Wheelers' place, so he was laying in bed listening to music when he heard a loud knock at the front door. At the sound, his hands balled into fists, but he took a deep breath as he walked over and peered through the peephole.

"Hey, Byers," Steve looked tense, as though he was ready to launch into a prepared speech.

"Uh, hey. Wanna come in?" He gestured toward the couch, and Steve followed, but his head was whipping around at the house's transformation since the last time he dropped by unannounced. As if

he believed that the Byers were so weird they always kept dozens of Christmas lights strung up inside and makeshift weapons laying on their coffee table. Jonathan stayed standing. "What's up?"

"I never got to apologize that night," he began.

"It's fine—"

"It's not fine," he cut him off. "I said some really...some really fucked up things to you. About your family."

Jonathan crossed his arms. "Yeah."

"I know, it was totally out of line. I was just trying to impress Tommy and Carol, or something. They're assholes. I haven't talked to either of them since then."

He nodded, and Steve lowered his voice.

"Look, I was just...jealous, okay?"

He could picture Steve's BMW parked next to his beat up Ford out front, and he found it hard to believe that Steve Harrington would ever be jealous of anything about him.

"It's true," he continued. "Nancy blew me off, and I knew that something was wrong, but I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I still don't. But I saw you two together in her room, and—"

"Nothing happened," he blurted out, unsure if it was for Steve's benefit or for his.

"I know. But you can understand why I was upset, right?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry too," he acknowledged. He hadn't forgotten the insults and the graffiti in the alley where they had brawled. "For taking those pictures of your party. It was a pretty...pervy thing to do."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Yeah, what the hell was that?"

"I wasn't... It's not like I went to the woods to spy on all of you. I

really was looking for my brother, and I heard a scream and..." He still didn't know how he was supposed to justify this.

"I get it, you were going through a lot of shit. I shouldn't have broken your camera."

The awkwardness was becoming too much to bear, so Jonathan said the first thing that came into his mind. "Do you want a drink or something?"

He found a half-empty fifth of vodka in the cabinet, and he and Steve took turns downing swigs straight from the bottle. Jonathan made a face as the first sip burned his throat. The taste of alcohol reminded him of the times his dad took him on fishing trips or to sporting events or pretty much any activity intended to make him a "real man." But in situations like these, it helped.

Steve's eyes drifted to some family portraits on the shelf, and he gestured at them with the bottle. "Did you take those?"

"Uh, some of them. There's more here." He rummaged through the cluttered bookcase and produced a few albums and a floral memory box filled with unsorted prints.

Steve flipped through the first photobook. "You guys look really happy here." He pointed to a picture of Will, a few years younger, and his mom roasting marshmallows over a campfire.

"That was after my dad left, for good. I think...she didn't want to sleep in their bed that night, so we pitched a tent in our backyard."

He was quiet for a few moments, studying the photograph, and then he shook his head. "Jesus, Jonathan. I still can't believe what I said—"

"Just don't worry about it, okay? You saved me from a monster. I think that makes us even." It didn't escape his notice that Steve referred to him by his first name.

His face lit up before he had the sense to conceal it. "Yeah, that was—"

"It was pretty badass," Jonathan conceded, figuring that it was what

he wanted to hear. Steve's laughter proved his instincts correct. "Like, when you twirled that bat around—"

"It's all thanks to Little League." His look of pride turned pensive, accessing a long lost memory, "Didn't you play back then too?"

He snorted, glad that was well before he started documenting his life on film and there was no photographic evidence of him in that uniform. "Yeah, my dad made me. I wasn't very good."

"Well, you're not bad at taking pictures." Steve shut the album and checked his watch. "Hey, I should probably get going—"

Jonathan stood up and led him to the front door. "Well, uh. Thanks for stopping by."

"I have to meet Nancy – we're going to watch the game," he explained. "You can come, if you want." He couldn't expect Jonathan to accept, and he had zero desire to join, so he couldn't comprehend why people felt compelled to do this.

"No, thanks. You okay to drive?"

"Yeah. But you should have lunch with us when you get back," Steve suggested.

He gave an noncommittal nod. "See you, Steve."

He figured that would be the end of it, but if Steve Harrington was anything, it was persistent. The following Monday, as he was passing by the lunch line, Steve spotted him. "Hey, Byers!" He handed a fistful of bills to the bemused lunch lady and dragged him to their table.

Nancy's eyes flew up at him, and then she stared back down at her tray. The chair clanged as Steve settled next to her, and Jonathan set down the packed lunch his mom prepared for the first time since he was in elementary school.

"Hey, Nancy."

"Jonathan!" she said, her voice sounding somehow bright and brittle at the same time. "I didn't know you were coming back to school

today."

"Will wanted to go back as soon as possible, so..."

"How is he?"

"He's good. He got out of the hospital a few days after, and he's been recovering at home."

"That's great." Nancy was smiling, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. There were dark purple circles underneath, and he remembered what Steve said about her nightmares.

Jonathan wanted to ask how she had been holding up, but he anticipated that she would lie and say, "Fine," and that would be the end of it. Instead, he asked, "How's Mike doing?"

"Oh, he's...um." He could see her trying to work out a response, and after a few moments, she settled for, "Well, he's happy that Will is back."

Steve was looking between the two of them in bewilderment, and Jonathan tried to understand what the hell he thought would happen. He could see other people in the cafeteria watching their table without making any effort to hide it as they exchanged whispered gossip. No one else knew that they had fought a monster together, and no one would believe it anyway. He almost wished that Tommy and Carol would come by to give him a reason to escape, but Steve must have warned them in advance.

So they were trapped. If Steve left (even though he wouldn't), it would validate everyone's beliefs that Nancy was dating *Jonathan Byers*. If Nancy left, people would think that the two boys she supposedly slept with dumped her. And if Jonathan left, it confirmed that Steve won, and Nancy chose him. The last interpretation wasn't too far from the truth, but he found himself unwilling to perpetuate that narrative.

Screw them. Let them all try to figure out what *this* meant.

It felt like an eternity, but at most twenty seconds passed before Steve spoke in a hushed tone, "I still never found out. How did you

guys find out about that – that *thing*?"

Nancy looked like a deer frozen in headlights, so it was up to Jonathan to respond. "Nancy saw it in the woods, and it was in the picture with Barbara, so we went back to look for it."

His condensed version left out all of the terror they experienced as well as the meaningful moments they shared.

"But the – the lights, and the blood–" He blinked back his crazed look, and Jonathan was beginning to understand why Steve had sought him out. His eyes darted between the scab on his left palm and over to Nancy's matching wound. She seemed to be thinking along the same lines, because she closed her hand into a loose fist before wincing slightly.

"Maybe we should talk about this some other time." It was about as convincing as the time he tried to kick Steve out of his house before the monster appeared, but he acquiesced.

They spent the rest of lunch suffering through inane small talk – what they had been doing in class, movies that had come out during the holiday season. Nancy didn't say anything.

But when the bell rang and they were leaving the cafeteria, she lingered while he deposited his trash. "It's good to have you back," she said in such a small whisper that he later assumed he had imagined it.

It got a little easier after that, but it still never felt right. Steve talked to Nancy, and Steve talked to Jonathan, but neither of them initiated the conversation, with him or with one another. Sometimes, Nancy used the excuse that she needed to work on school projects, and Jonathan jumped at any opportunity to develop prints for the introductory photography class, but for the most part, they settled into this strange little routine. Over time, the chatter died down as people got bored and discovered new scandals to discuss.

All those memories were running through Jonathan's mind as he scrubbed at the pots and pans. Only when he was laying in bed did he permit himself to dwell on the events from tonight. He placed his

hand over his heart where her palm had rested, could almost still feel the brush of her lips against his cheek.

He had lied.

Last weekend, he was driving home from a long shift when it crossed his mind that it was the night of the Winter Formal. He wondered what she was wearing. If she was having a good time. How she was dancing with Steve.

For a while, he had fooled himself into thinking that he could get an accurate read on the people around him without ever speaking to them, but spending that week with Nancy had changed that.

He had never been that close to anyone before, either physically or emotionally. People didn't always try to hide what they meant, at least not with friends. When they trusted each other enough to be vulnerable, they said more than a passing expression captured in a photograph ever could.

It felt like they were starting to understand each other. That if they continued spending time together, they could even be more than friends. He almost told her all of this, how glad he was that she had been by his side during the hardest week of his life, before Steve banged on the front door and ruined the moment.

In the end, it wasn't even friendship. It had been a partnership forged in desperation to achieve a common goal, and that was all.

When Will came back, he redoubled his focus on his family, and he was even trying to put more effort into his schoolwork and talking to other classmates. He smiled more.

But a light seemed to have been extinguished behind Nancy's eyes when it became clear that Barbara was never coming back. That they hadn't even managed to kill the monster without a young girl sacrificing her life for them.

He longed to reassure her, to remind her that none of it was her fault. He wanted to lay on her bed again, facing her, and this time he would stay awake and make sure that she fell asleep first.

Except that was Steve's role. So Jonathan settled for the only thing he was allowed to do, and what he always did when he was struggling to process his emotions or communicate them to someone else.

He made her a mixtape.

"Heroes" seemed like the perfect opener, even though the second verse about lovers was too presumptuous. He made it a point not to include any songs with the word "love" in the title or the chorus. But as he rifled through his favorite albums, the thought crossed his mind that Nancy wouldn't like any of them. She had a Blondie calendar in her room, for God's sake.

It was a stupid gift, he decided, but he had already recorded half of it, and he wasn't going to let a perfectly good tape go to waste.

For half a second, he considered "You Can't Always Get What You Want" for the closing track, but it seemed too pathetic, and he realized that it had been stuck in his head because of *The Big Chill*. As he debated over another song, which was less embarrassing but more honest than he thought he should be, he reminded himself that he wasn't going to give this to her anyway. He added it.

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Dear Barb,

You know how I told you that Steve decided to replace Jonathan's camera? Well, today I gave it to him, and I don't even know why, but I kissed him on the cheek. He gave me one of those little half-smiles and left to drive Will home. Then I went back to the living room with Steve, but all I wanted to do was run up to my room and call you.

I can't believe I did it. I'm dating Steve, and Jonathan and I haven't even really talked since you disappeared.

Obviously, it was sweet of Steve, and I know he's been trying to get Jonathan and me to talk about everything we went through together. Why doesn't he understand that I don't want to talk about it? I'm sure Jonathan doesn't either. I just wish everything could go back to the way it used to be.

Steve doesn't get it. He was only there for one night, and then it was over. I bet he thinks it was kind of cool. Like he's dying to brag about it to anyone who will believe him. Now he just wants us all to be friends, but I haven't been able to do that.

So, you'd probably ask, why did I kiss Jonathan?

I keep saying I don't know, but you wouldn't let me get away with that. I know.

I guess I wanted to give him something just from me.

She paused, reread her last sentence.

Does that sound crazy?

And then she snickered to herself and put down her pen. She's been writing letters to her dead best friend. *That* was crazy.

The diary snapped shut as she rubbed her eyes and left to climb into bed.

That night, she dreamt that she was falling into the Upside Down, the crack in the tree swallowing her whole. She landed not with a thud but with an odd squelch into the substance that felt slimy, sticky, and somehow like it was pulsing. It enveloped her entire body, preventing her from moving. All she could do was stare at the decaying surroundings and mysterious particles floating in the chill air.

When she heard the familiar creaking sound, her eyes darted to the source. She could just make out the silhouette of the monster a few feet away, peeling open its petals.

It spat out something that landed in front of her face.

Barb's glasses, stained with blood.

As Nancy stared at her reflection in horror, the creature lunged right at her.

2. Year After Year

Summary for the Chapter:

She had never imagined that she would be at a New Year's Eve Party at Steve Harrington's house, hiding away with Jonathan Byers. She had never imagined that a lot of things in her life would happen, but then they did.

A week had passed since Christmas, but everyone's lights were still up.

As sentimental as it was, he used to like seeing the streets twinkling with color. Now it served as a constant reminder of his house the week that Will went missing, when he believed that his mom was losing her mind, and he couldn't wait until the holidays were over.

Jonathan drummed his hands on the steering wheel, out of sync with the music. The clock changed to 9:01, and he deliberated whether he should go ring the doorbell when she stepped out of the house, hugging herself as the chill hit her.

She was already out of breath when she reached his car, and he turned the heater up. *It'll help drown out the silence*, he thought.

"Thanks for picking me up."

He shrugged like it was no big deal. Like they had been doing this sort of thing all the time, and not like it was the first time since he sped home from the school to fight the monster a month and a half ago. (Steve had begged her to accompany him on the way to the hospital, saying they had a lot to talk about, and she had just nodded, exchanging a meaningful look with Jonathan as she climbed into the front seat of the BMW. It was the last time they had shared a look like that.)

"I didn't think you'd want to come to a party like this," Nancy remarked, but he saw her cringe as the words left her mouth.

He wasn't offended in the slightest. It was true, even he had doubts about going to something he would have criticized as a stupid high school cliché not too long ago. He settled for the facts. "Steve invited me."

She hesitated again, and he hated how uncomfortable it all felt, even though it shouldn't have been surprising – that was the default setting for his social interactions. What had disarmed him more was how effortless it had been to open up to her that week. There simply wasn't room for feeling embarrassed or overthinking your impulsive actions in life or death situations. Not until it was over, anyway.

"Did you bring your camera?" Her eyes traveled around the compartments of his car.

"Oh, yeah." He cursed himself for forgetting to mention it, jerking his head toward the backseat. "It's back there. And I, uh – I wanted to say thank you." Since they were on winter break, he hadn't seen her since Christmas Eve. She occupied his thoughts more than ever after she kissed him, but he would never reveal that she was one of the main draws for attending Steve's party. Just as he would never admit how many times he had fantasized about what might happen between them. It took all his effort to keep those expectations in check. The biggest obstacle, besides his own insecurity, was the fact that she was in a relationship. That hadn't mattered when Steve acted like an arrogant bully, but now he didn't want to jeopardize their friendship or for anyone to get hurt.

"No problem," Nancy had replied, and while he was lost in his thoughts, she added, "It was Steve's idea."

"Oh." Though it was what he had suspected, it stung nonetheless. "I'll have to thank him then."

The only sounds for the remainder of the ride came from the heater and the stereo's faint refrain, "*Should I stay or should I go?*"

As he pulled up to the curb, he contemplated dropping Nancy off and driving back home. But anything seemed better than sitting in his car any longer, so he turned off the engine, removed the key, unbuckled his seatbelt, and threw his door open. He was making his way around

the car when caught a glimpse of Nancy eyeing the backseat, but she didn't say a word as she followed him up the driveway.

“Byers!” Steve acknowledged him first when he threw open the front door. His voice softened as he leaned in to give his girlfriend a kiss. “Hey, you.”

Jonathan looked past them into the house. A few guests had already arrived, standing around and holding plastic cups, and there was pop music blaring from another room.

“Want a beer?” Steve led them to the kitchen and grabbed a can from the fridge.

He accepted it without hesitation. “Thanks. And, hey, thanks for the camera. Nancy told me.”

“Yeah, no problem.” He held out another beer for her, but she shook her head.

“Maybe later.”

“Sure.” Steve glanced between the two of them as he pulled back the tab, but whatever he was thinking, he kept it to himself. “Well, cheers!”

“Cheers,” Jonathan repeated, lifting the can to his lips. He could feel Nancy’s eyes on him as he choked down the first gulp.

He had way too much to drink that night.

- - -

Nancy didn't drink at all.

She clutched a red cup throughout the party so people wouldn't bother her, but she kept refilling it with water.

She abstained because the first and last time she drank alcohol was in this very house, when she shotgunned a beer to impress some douchebags. Barb just rolled her eyes before Nancy insisted that she join in, before the knife slipped on the curved aluminum and she

sliced her finger instead. And then...

It was impossible to stop thinking about it. Of course, she had gone over to Steve's house a few times since then, but it had always been during the day, when his parents were around. Not at night, with dozens of classmates she didn't care about. Certainly not with Jonathan.

But that gave her something to fixate on besides her best friend's absence, so she kept tabs on him throughout the party.

At first, he was still a little withdrawn. He sipped a beer with Steve, and they chatted about the usual things guys talked about, but which she hadn't expected him to know or care about – cars, baseball. She didn't participate.

After a while, she was sure that she was seeing a stranger. Barb must have felt that way about her, she realized with a sharp stab.

Some jocks from the basketball team showed up, and they started playing drinking games. It was so stupid and immature – they would take turns chugging a cup of beer and then trying to flip it over to land facedown on the table. That was the entire game. Someone's older brother at State had "taught" him.

They declared Jonathan the MVP after the first round, and he began to loosen up, both figuratively and literally. He joked around with the other guys and freed himself from his hunched posture. When he smiled, it wasn't one of those wry, half-grins he had given her, but it filled his whole face. Nancy felt the urge to take a picture. So she could have more time to examine what he was saying.

"Hey, Nance – do you want to play?" Steve asked, refilling the red cups. He had been patient with her all night, but he was also the host, so every few minutes he left to answer the door or entertain other guests. In a past life, she might have felt annoyed and forced herself to talk to other people. Now, however, she relished the solitude.

She shook her head, excusing herself to go to the bathroom. As she passed the living room, the bluish glow caught her eye. With

everyone else preoccupied, she slid the glass door open and slipped outside.

The biting cold should have deterred her or at least convinced her to grab her coat from Steve's room, but she found herself drawn to the diving board across the heated pool. Halfway there, she heard a soft voice behind her.

"Nice weather for a swim?"

She turned around, unsure what to say. It had been a temporary relief to escape the crowd and cacophony of voices shouting over the music until faced with the site of her best friend's abduction. Added to the mix of emotions were apprehension and anticipation at the prospect of spending a private moment with him, even if he wasn't himself in his present state. She never quite knew what to expect from him. His quiet, brooding exterior had masked both his caring nature and his capacity to lash out to protect himself and the people he loved. This was but another unseen side of him, giddy and carefree.

It turned out that despite his drunken stupor, Jonathan was as observant as ever. "Here," he said, shrugging off his denim jacket after she shivered involuntarily. "Take this."

"You'll freeze," she protested, but he was already stumbling past her toward the patio furniture. Underneath his flannel, he was wearing the striped blue sweater he had wrapped around her shoulders that night. She considered whether it was intentional, and then she remembered that boys didn't obsess about their wardrobe choices like girls had to.

"I'm fine. It was getting too hot anyway." He slumped into a chair, and she took a seat next to him, still struggling to find her voice. Jonathan didn't suffer from the same problem once he had a few beers in him. "I knew I'd find you out here. You're not having a good time, are you?"

Her first thought was, *you were looking for me?* But that was either too earnest or flirtatious, so she smirked instead. "And I thought I was doing an okay job pretending."

“Yeah, you’re pretty good at that. You’ve never been one to half-ass anything.” He sounded so sure of himself, and it bothered her, even though it was true.

“Oh yeah?”

“Sure. Whether it’s acing a chemistry test or shooting a gun, Nancy Wheeler is a perfectionist.”

Her laughter rang hollow, and he sensed that he had said the wrong thing and changed the subject.

“I mean, you’ve been like that for as long as I can remember, anyway.”

Curiosity overtook her, and she turned toward him. “What do you remember?”

He met her gaze for a second and then looked off somewhere past her, shrugging. “You’ve always been at the top of the class. You won all those awards in middle school.”

“That’s all?” She didn’t bother hiding her disappointment.

“I dunno, it’s Hawkins. It’s a small town, and we had classes together, but you were just like any other girl. It’s not like I was paying much attention to you.”

His blunt statement made her feel foolish, conceited. Had she expected that he had been obsessed with her all these years? After all, she hadn’t thought about him much before that week. Their younger brothers were best friends, but he was just some guy in her grade who sometimes stopped by her house to pick up Will.

“Except,” he continued, and she perked up. “Except I remember the end-of-the-year play in fifth grade.”

“*Sleeping Beauty*,” she recalled, touching her necklace. “It was a ballet, sort of. I was Aurora.” It had been her first leading role of many throughout her preteen years, before she started high school and told her parents that she wanted to quit dancing. And yet she kept her favorite music box on her dresser and wore the gold charm

her Nana gave her after her first recital, as remnants of her past life.

“Yeah. That’s not why I remembered you,” he chuckled. “But this kind of sums up everything.”

She had no idea what he was referring to. “What do you mean?”

“I was assigned to the stage crew. I had to paint a castle for the backdrop. The inspiration for Castle Byers.”

When he was tipsy, he was much more animated, gesturing with his hands while he talked. Nancy willed herself to stop taking in these details.

“The girls wanted me to make it look nice, but I only cared about the defensive parts – making the towers taller, including a moat so no one could get in.” He paused, raising an eyebrow. “You told me to add a trebuchet.”

“I did?”

“You did.” He grinned out of the corner of his mouth, and it occurred to her that this might be a smile he reserved for her.

“I don’t remember that.” Nancy was mystified – she had always prided herself on her memory. She had also kept a detailed diary since she was nine, and she made a note to consult her old ones when she got home.

“I didn’t either, until a few weeks ago. Because...you know.”

She knew, and they both knew that the topic was off-limits, so she pressed on with the current line of conversation. “My first memory – my first *specific* memory of you is when you won the science fair.”

“That feels like a long time ago.”

He went quiet, but she couldn’t stop herself. It was true, the reason that their biology teacher had agreed to take their younger brothers under his wing was that Jonathan had been on the original winning team for the regional science fair, even if it seemed so incongruous with his current identity.

“Mr. Clarke wanted me to join too, so I came to a meeting once, but I was too busy with ballet rehearsals. It was you and that group of boys – Brian and Mark and David S. – you built some kind of electronic device, and you gave a presentation to our class about it. I thought you were really smart.” She glanced over at him, but he was gazing off at the stars. “I mean, you still are.”

He rolled his eyes, and she wanted him to believe her, so she gave his arm a nudge. That small point of contact caused a sensation of warmth to course through her, and she was sure that her cheeks had reddened.

“Seriously. I just think...I think you’ve been preoccupied with other things.” She meant it. Jonathan was one of the few kids she had known who held a job as soon as they were old enough. Just a few weeks ago, he was shopping for caskets for his younger brother’s funeral.

“I know I haven’t been ‘applying myself,’” he said as though the words left an acrid taste in his mouth. “That I have so much *potential*. That’s what the guidance counselor told me. But that was before they started fighting nonstop. Before they finally got divorced.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. Of course that was why he had stopped caring, stopped trying in school. While she and Brian and Mark and David S. were worried about getting A’s in their honors classes, Jonathan had been struggling to manage a household.

“It’s fine. It’s better now that he’s gone.” He pushed back the chair and wandered to the other side of the pool by the edge of the woods. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Yeah, sorry,” she repeated. She began to follow him but froze once she reached the diving board. To stop herself from picturing her best friend sitting there, and because it was still bothering her that she couldn’t access the memory, she blurted out, “Did I really tell you to add a trebuchet?”

“You even quoted *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.” He laughed, and the darkness was erased from his features just like that.

Holding her breath, she made it around the pool to stand beside him. Indeed, she had watched that movie more than once in elementary school, and more times since with Mike and his friends, but the memory of reciting lines to Jonathan eluded her. "I don't know why I can't remember that."

"It wasn't important. I only remembered it because I thought you were pretty." It was an offhand remark as he kept his attention on the steam rising from the pool, but Nancy was taken aback.

"You thought I was pretty?" She had never imagined that he would compliment her like that, but then again, she had never imagined that she would be at a New Year's Eve Party at Steve Harrington's house, hiding away with Jonathan Byers. She had never imagined that a lot of things in her life would happen, but then they did.

"Pretty...cool," he amended, but a smile was tugging at the corner of his lips.

She hoped to meet his eyes again, but the spell was broken as he abruptly turned away.

Correction: she had never imagined that she would be at a New Year's Eve Party at Steve Harrington's house, hiding away while Jonathan Byers threw up in the bushes.

Her exhale produced a visible puff of air. "Let's go inside."

He nodded, wiping his mouth as he ambled toward the sliding door. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay," she stated, but she wasn't concentrating on him in that moment. She was thinking about castles and science fair trophies and a smart, sensitive kid who was forced to grow up so fast that his friends could no longer understand him. She thought that she was starting to get it.

"Hey, where were you?" Steve questioned when they made it back to the kitchen. He looked concerned, taking in Jonathan, who went to rinse his mouth in the sink. That was when she became aware of the oversized jacket hanging off her shoulders.

“Um, Jonathan wasn’t feeling well,” she pointed out the obvious but only partial truth. “I think I should drive him back.” Out of the corner of her eye, she could tell that he was watching her, but she kept her focus trained on Steve.

“It’s not even midnight!” he exclaimed, slinging his arm around her shoulders. “You can’t leave yet.”

“I have to get home too. My parents don’t like me staying out so late, especially since...” She trailed off, hating herself for taking advantage of this situation, but it *was* the reason she didn’t want to be at this party, after all.

“I guess I can’t argue with that.” He sighed and put his beer down on the counter. “Let’s go get your coat.”

She continued to avoid looking in his direction as she accompanied Steve upstairs.

He didn’t interrogate her or accuse them of anything, even though he had every right to as she swapped Jonathan’s outerwear with her own. Instead, he stared out his window without a word, and that reaction unsettled her more than if he had shouted.

They hadn’t done anything, she reminded herself. Against all odds, the alcohol had *prevented* them from doing anything they would have regretted. But the night wasn’t over yet.

“I should go.” She rested her hand on Steve’s shoulder as she gave him a quick peck on the lips.

“Happy New Year,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

It was all a show, she recognized now, his swagger and false confidence. She had fallen for it before she had truly gotten to know him. Yet when you stripped away the popularity and the nice car and big house, he was just a confused teenager like the rest of them, estranged from his parents and worried about his life after graduation.

After three years of pining from afar, it was clear that she wasn’t going to get over Steve Harrington in a few days or even weeks, no

matter how many life-changing events had occurred. He was a decent guy who had succumbed to peer pressure and then redeemed himself. Except she used to view him in abstract terms - as a status symbol, a rebellion, a way to escape her mundane existence. Nancy just wasn't quite ready to confess that maybe he wasn't what she needed anymore.

A few minutes later, she was sitting behind the steering wheel of Jonathan's car, trying to pay attention to the road and not on how peculiar it was to see him from this angle, their positions reversed. He had the passenger side window cracked open, even though it was still freezing outside.

"I wanted to leave too," he mumbled, leaning his head against the seatbelt and drifting off.

Nancy just kept driving.

"If I go there will be trouble," the stereo crackled. *"And if I stay it will be double."*

Once she pulled up to the Byers' house, she shut off the engine and studied him without the fear of being caught. He was so peaceful, unlike the way he had tossed and turned in her bed that night as she sat beside him, poring through her illustrated encyclopedia set. She took care not to brush against him as she reached for the camera on the backseat. It felt safer watching him this way, behind a lens. When the shutter clicked, he awoke with a start.

"Hey. We're at your house now," she said, lowering the camera with a blush.

He rubbed his eyes. "How are you going to get home?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it. She didn't have a good answer for that.

"You can stay here," he offered. "...I mean, if you don't mind. I don't think I can drive you home right now."

"Um, sure." She handed him his camera and car keys and kept close as they walked right into the setting that had haunted her dreams for

the past month.

When he flipped on the light, it was like she was visiting for the first time. The painted letters on the wall were gone, and the single string of lights made sense on a Christmas tree. Her eyes fell onto a fresh patch of carpet in the hallway, and it didn't go unnoticed.

He grasped her hand, and it transported her to her bedroom that morning after he spent the night, when they had maintained a firm grasp even after her mother's voice signaled that they weren't in any danger. To the time their fingertips danced against each other after she bandaged his cut and stroked the tape over his palm in this very room.

"Over here..." He didn't let go as they walked past the spot where they had nailed down the bear trap with bated breaths. This time, he led her into a room across the hallway from the one where they had stationed themselves. Even as she realized that she had never seen his bedroom, somehow it felt familiar. Jonathan motioned for her to sit on the bed, clearing aside a pile of dirty clothes. "I'm going to get some water, okay? I'll be right back."

Nancy nodded, and the door closed behind him with a gentle click. It's safe in here, she told herself. The monster never appeared in his room. She stood up to inspect it further, removing her woolen coat and draping it over a green chair in the corner. Then she skimmed over his desk – an American history textbook, some crumpled up pieces of paper, a worn composition book, a label-maker, some records and a stack of cassettes. The one on top caught her eye.

Scrawled in a blue marker was her name. *Nancy*.

Without thinking, she snatched the tape and hid it in her coat pocket.

When Jonathan returned, she was studying the posters on his walls. "Sorry about the mess. I wasn't really expecting..." His words were still coming out slurred.

"No, it's fine. Thanks for letting me stay." She prayed that he didn't hear the tremble in her voice.

“You can take my bed. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“No!” It came out no louder than a whisper, but the urgency startled them both. “I’m sorry, it’s just... Can you stay here?”

A beat passed.

“Of course,” he said, sober enough at least to keep his expression guarded.

He switched off the main light but left the bedside lamp on, either an unspoken acknowledgement that he still didn't feel safe in the dark or out of consideration for her. Perhaps both. She stood up as he pulled back the covers, and they squeezed into his twin bed. Their sides were reversed this time, and Nancy tried to banish the thought from her mind. Jonathan slept in her bed once, over a month ago. They didn't have *sides*.

To her envy, he fell asleep in no time, and she wondered if she should have indulged in a drink after all. But that would have lowered her inhibitions during their chat by the pool, and she wouldn't have been able to drive him home. They would have stayed at the party until the sun rose, and she would have awoken in Steve's room instead.

When the glowing red numbers on his alarm clock switched to 12:00, she imagined all the popular kids celebrating, popping champagne and making out. Doing more than that. Despite her current environment, she was glad that she wasn't there.

“Happy New Year,” she whispered to Jonathan’s sleeping form. He didn't reply.

Mere centimeters separated them as they clung to their respective edges, but it wasn't enough. Now that she was there, and it was so late, she permitted herself to acknowledge how much safer she would feel if he'd just wrap his arms around her. Though she hadn't expected him to be the hugging type, Jonathan had known how to comfort her after he pulled her out of the Upside Down. He must have learned from consoling his mother – her breakdowns had been common gossip in the town – or maybe from cheering up Will

whenever bullies made fun of him. She hated herself for not doing the same for her younger brother.

But guilt couldn't overcome her present fear. Thinking about Mike led to memories of walkie-talkies and a little girl with superpowers and that *thing* they had named the Demogorgon. She couldn't stop imagining the creature breaking through the walls, crawling out of the ceiling, chasing them down the hallway right outside this very door. Steve attacking it with a spiked baseball bat. Steve.

She wasn't sure when she fell asleep, but when she did, she dreamt that she was protected by a strong stone fortress.

- - -

When he awoke the next morning, Jonathan did something he thought only happened in movies, performing a double-take at the sleeping form in his bed. It was Nancy, wrapped in his sheets with her brown curls spayed across the pillowcase.

His mind raced, trying to piece together the details. She appeared to be fully dressed, and he was still wearing his jeans from the night before. Of course they would have never done anything besides sleep. Feeling a bad taste in his mouth, he took a swig from the glass of water he must have poured for himself and left on the nightstand. His head hurt.

But he went to make breakfast, because that's what he always did. He had done it every morning, even before his dad left. It was a mindless routine that took his mind off the previous night – cracking eggs into a bowl, whisking them with a fork, pouring them into the frying pan, scooping them onto the plates with toast. His mom had already left to work the morning shift, but he made three plates as usual. As usual as this could be, anyway.

He went to wake up Will, and then he took a deep breath before heading back to his room.

“Um, hey.” As his fingertips grazed her shoulder, Nancy's eyes flew open in terror. “It's okay, it's okay! I'm sorry, I just – I made breakfast.”

She propped herself onto her elbows, taking in her surroundings. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. I'm sorry about last night." He didn't want to go into the details, but he figured that should suffice.

"Yeah, that was..." She seemed to be searching for the right words, but they didn't come to her. "Screw it. I'm starving."

Will's eyebrows shot up behind his bangs when they emerged from his room, but Jonathan knew that he wouldn't say anything in front of Nancy. Nonetheless, he was already preparing himself for the questions his little brother would ask him later that night.

"Hi, Nancy," Will greeted her, as though there was nothing unusual about seeing his best friend's older sister spending the night in his house.

"Hi, Will," she responded, unable to meet his eyes as she joined him at the table. She wasn't so good at pretending that early.

"Do you want orange juice?" Jonathan asked, but they both shook their heads. "Uh, Will – you're going to the Wheelers' today, right? I can drive you."

Will shook his head again, trying to mask his amusement. "It's okay. I can bike over."

"You know what Mom said," he said with a stern look, but it was difficult for him to sound authoritative when he was aware of Nancy's presence. He was lucky that Will was a good-natured kid, and that he wasn't a few years older, or this scenario would be unbearable.

"Fine, I'll ask Dustin to meet me here," he granted. "We'll bike there together. Is that alright?"

Jonathan nodded, and then they sat there in silence, him poking at his eggs, unable to take a bite. Will, on the other hand, scarfed down his food and went to call Dustin from his room, leaving the two of them alone.

"Thanks for breakfast," Nancy said, setting down her piece of toast. "For letting me stay over."

"Did you sleep okay?" he asked, knowing it was a stupid question. Who could sleep in this house, after everything that had happened? He still struggled to manage it, and he had been there every night. (Well, every night except for one.)

"Fine," she lied, and they lapsed into silence again. He noticed that she was keeping her focus on the table, refusing to stray toward the living room, even when there was a knock at the front door ten minutes later.

"Hey, Nancy!" It was for the best that she didn't see Dustin's wide, toothless grin. Right then, Jonathan promised himself to set the boys straight about what had happened when he went to pick up Will after work.

"I'll come get you at six, okay? So you better be done with your campaign by then." He ruffled his brother's hair, and Dustin snickered as Will swatted him away.

"That's only eight hours!" he whined, and all the boys laughed. After saying their goodbyes, Jonathan returned to the dining table, where Nancy was staring at her empty plate.

"I'll drive you home after I get ready," he told her as he cleaned up. "You can wait in my room if you want."

He walked with her to grab a change of clothes – keeping his hands balled in his pockets as they moved through the hallway – and then he headed to the bathroom where he brushed his teeth, splashed some water on his face, and peered at his reflection. There were still bags under his eyes, but he was embarrassed to admit that last night was the best he had slept in weeks. He wasn't sure if it was because of the alcohol or Nancy. Probably a combination of both, but neither option was a realistic long-term solution.

He shook his head, drying his face with his towel. He couldn't think about her like that. The reason she stayed over was because he drove her to Steve's party, and she had no other way to get home. He knew

that he should have felt some remorse, but he didn't.

After all, nothing had happened. Nothing was ever going to happen.

He knew she wouldn't mention it, and he definitely wasn't going to be the first person to bring it up. By tomorrow, they would go back to the usual routine they had created. He would sit with them at lunch and ask Steve what happened after they left the party, and Nancy wouldn't say anything. Not to him, anyway.

With a sigh, Jonathan went back out to drive her home.

- - -

It was another excruciating car ride.

The mixtape ended, and Nancy clutched the one in her pocket while Jonathan switched to the radio. The song playing was "Every Breath You Take" by The Police, which increased the awkwardness immeasurably before he shut it off midway through the soaring, pleading bridge.

They didn't talk until he pulled up next to her lawn, but she was busy reevaluating their confessions from the previous night. The unexpected phrase, "*I thought you were pretty*," kept popping into her head at random intervals.

"Thanks again," she said without a backwards glance as she thrust open the car door.

"See you," he replied, and he drove off before she even made it to the house.

As expected, her mom greeted her in the hallway with a mixture of fury and concern. But to the surprise of both of them, Nancy told the truth. Her eyes filled with tears as she admitted that she couldn't stop thinking about Barb, that she didn't want to drink, didn't want to be at Steve's party, didn't want to stay at the Byers' house – but she didn't have a choice.

"You should have called," her mom said, enveloping her in a soothing hug. "It doesn't matter what time it is, we can come and get

you, you know that?”

Nancy nodded. “Is it alright if I go to my room? I couldn’t really sleep last night.”

“Of course. Did you already have breakfast? There are blueberry pancakes on the table.”

“Yeah, um, Jonathan made scrambled eggs.” As bizarre as it was, saying it out loud was proof that the past 24 hours hadn’t all been a dream. “I’ll come down for lunch.”

“Get some rest, sweetie.” Her mom patted her on the back, and Nancy ran up to her room, locking the door behind her.

Her hands wavering, she inserted the cassette into her tape player.

“I, I will be king,” David Bowie crooned. *“And you, you will be queen. Though nothing, will drive them away. We can beat them, just for one day. We can be heroes, just for one day.”* She smiled and sprawled on her bed for the first of many listens.

An hour later, the phrase *“Dance, dance, dance, dance, dance, to the radio”* was sung one more time, the drumming came to a close, and her room lapsed into silence. Nancy continued to lay on top of her covers, confused. What did Jonathan mean, putting that as the final song? What was he trying to tell her?

Nothing, she scolded herself. He didn’t give her the mixtape, she had stolen it. Maybe he had never meant for her to hear it at all.

She sat up to confirm that the tape had stopped, but she noticed that it was still spinning slowly right as she heard a strange staticky dialogue and someone plucking at a guitar. Intrigued, she laid back down.

While she had to admit that she wasn’t a fan of every song in the mix, this one resonated with her from the beginning. Perhaps it was the slow tempo, the interplay of the different instruments, or the melancholy lyrics. Whatever the original reason, by the time the music crescendoed into the final verse, she had stopped breathing.

Nancy played the song on repeat until she fell asleep.

*"How I wish, how I wish you were here
We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl
Year after year
Running over the same old ground.
What have we found?
The same old fears
Wish you were here."*

She dreamed again of falling into the Upside Down, of feeling stuck, of Barb's bloody glasses being spit out in front of her face.

But this time, before the monster reached her, she was pulled through a crack in the ground, through more thick layers of the oozing membrane until a soft body broke her fall.

"It's okay," Jonathan whispered, locking her in a tight embrace as their world came into focus. "I've got you."

Notes for the Chapter:

I really don't condone underage drinking, and it can be a cheap plot device, but it was in the show. I just thought it'd be interesting to write without going overboard. Anyway, this is new for me, so any feedback is appreciated. Thanks for taking the time to read these novels!

1/1/17: Made some more minor edits but as I said before, the plot itself is unchanged.

3. Just Two Lost Souls

Summary for the Chapter:

He started to offer to keep her company, but the words stuck in his throat. What exactly did he and Nancy *do* when they weren't trying to track down a monster who had taken their loved ones?

Notes for the Chapter:

The first chapter jumped around in time as I tried to get from the week the series took place to Christmas Eve, whereas New Year's Eve/Day was a single, chronological chapter. The final chapter will jump around even more, but I didn't want to get into Season 2 predictions and supernatural elements in this story, so I'm keeping it contained rather than keeping them apart until another life-threatening event a year later, even though that's more realistic – it's just beyond this scope.

Thanks again to all of you for reading, bookmarking, giving kudos, and leaving comments! It's been super encouraging, and now that I've gotten every single Jancy trope out of the way in this story, maybe I'll write something more original. (The college years seem tempting though...)

It seemed cruel that they had class the day after New Year's.

His shift had passed by in a hungover haze before he was back at the Wheelers' house to pick up his younger brother. As he had anticipated, Nancy didn't come down, and Mrs. Wheeler greeted him at the door.

Will didn't broach the subject during the drive home, but later that night, when they were playing *Joust* on the Atari, he asked offhandedly, "So are you dating Nancy now?"

Jonathan set down the controller, craning his neck to make sure that their mom was in her room. Any day now, he would have to give his younger brother “the talk,” but he had really been hoping it would never come to that. Though he had given up on his father (whose attempt when he was ten years old had left him emotionally scarred and even more uncomfortable with the opposite sex), maybe their mom would meet someone who could handle it, or she would do it herself.

For now, he was spared. Leaving out the details about cheap beer and drinking games, he justified her sleeping over because he had been too tired to drive her home. She hadn’t wanted to stay at Steve’s because the party was in full swing, but they were still very much together.

“But she kissed you last week.” Will seemed perplexed.

“Yeah,” he had replied. He couldn’t comprehend that either.

Those thoughts were fresh in his mind that morning as he deposited his books in his locker, so he was too preoccupied to notice the figure approaching him until it was too late. Taking a deep breath, he fought the urge to slam the door shut and run away.

“Hey, man. Can we talk?”

“Okay.” He waited, but Steve was scanning the crowded hallway.

“Maybe in the parking lot?”

Despite his certainty that he was about to get punched in the face, he probably deserved it a little. He went along to meet his fate.

So when Steve ultimately stopped and turned around, Jonathan was rendered speechless.

“I think I need to break up with Nancy.” He was wearing an expression Jonathan had only seen once, before they ended up brawling in an alley. Humiliation.

He had no idea how he was supposed to respond. On the one hand, he had selfishly hoped for this outcome since November. His

pragmatic side maintained that he should want what was best for his friend and for her. Most of all, his pessimistic nature convinced him that even if Steve broke it off, that didn't mean that he would ever have a shot.

"I don't know what happened at the party," Steve went on, and he didn't sound angry in the slightest. It was more like desperation, the way he had pleaded with Nancy to forgive him the night Will returned. "I don't care. I mean, I care, but I don't...I don't really want to hear about it. I always knew something would happen."

"Nothing happened." That go-to phrase did little to reassure him, so although Jonathan was positive that the effects of alcohol couldn't stay in his system for longer than a day, he felt compelled to disclose as much as he could. He recounted how he had gone to check on Nancy when she headed for the pool, how they had done nothing but talk, and how he had thrown up, effectively ensuring that no lines were crossed. He stopped himself before getting to the part where she stayed over, but even that had been innocent except for some hand-holding. Friends held hands, right? Just like they sometimes kissed each other on the cheek, he reasoned.

"Look, it's not even because of you, okay? It's just..." Steve mussed at his hair, which Jonathan assumed took him more time and effort to craft each day than he spent attending to his appearance in a week. "I just don't think it's working. It was fun at first, but since everything that happened that week...I dunno, we're so – so different now. I still care about her, but..."

He raised his eyebrows, urging him to conclude that thought.

"But I'm not sure if she still wants to be with me." It was apparent that confiding that information had deeply wounded his pride.

Jonathan mulled it over before stating simply, "I think if she didn't want to be with you, she would have ended it."

"Yeah? I guess...yeah, she pointed a gun at me, for Christ's sake," he proclaimed, something like relief washing over his face. "No one could force her to do anything she didn't want to."

"Yeah."

"Am I just overreacting then? She was wearing your jacket because—"

"It was cold," Jonathan finished. "She looked sad. About Barbara. I wanted to make sure she was alright." In truth, Barbara hadn't come up at all, but he figured that was the subtext for their interaction.

"Oh shit. Barbara." He shook his head. "Of course that's why things have been so..."

The bell rang as he trailed off, and a safety monitor began ushering them toward the front door.

"Hey—" Steve said before they parted ways for their respective homerooms. "Don't tell Nancy about this, okay? She's been going through a lot, and you're right, it's probably not a good time to break things off."

He wasn't sure if that was the advice he had given, but whatever he had said, it was all for the best. At lunch, Steve acted as though nothing had happened, regaling them with stories about Donna dancing on the dining table and Tommy L. falling into the pool after downing a whole bottle of champagne. Nancy laughed appropriately, but she had the faraway look in her eyes that had haunted her features lately, and she hardly acknowledged his presence.

All day, the only thing he wanted to do was curl up in bed and listen to music. So when he got home, he stared at his tape collection in disbelief. At first, he thought it must have fallen off his desk, but it wasn't underneath it or around his bed. It wasn't in his car. It wasn't anywhere.

"Where else would it be?" he muttered to himself.

And suddenly, he realized.

Jonathan cursed.

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The first time it happened, someone shook her shoulder, and she

lurched forward with a gasp. "Wha – Mike?" She could just make out his silhouette and stared at him, eyes wide.

"You were screaming." His voice sounded raspy; as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she discerned that he was sleepy-eyed, his hair disheveled.

"Oh. I'm sorry," she whispered, hoping he wouldn't press her for details.

"It's okay."

But he hovered by her bedside, so Nancy sat up properly, leaning against her headboard. "What's wrong?"

"You were shouting his name."

Although he didn't specify, she figured out who he was referring to based on his knowing look.

"It's not like that." It had become something of a lame catchphrase when people asked her about him.

They shared a long pause, Nancy launching into defensive mode, and Mike working out a response in his head. When he finally opened his mouth, it wasn't at all what she expected.

"I kissed El," he confessed, his voice breaking slightly, and she was flooded with an overwhelming rush of pity and love for her younger brother.

She scooted over, opened up her comforter, and he climbed into her bed for the second time since Eleven disappeared. Unsure what she could say to console him, she kept up her end of their initially failed promise to tell each other everything.

"I'm guessing Will told you that I spent the night at their house on New Year's. We just slept," she clarified quickly, as Mike's face scrunched up in revulsion. "But it wasn't even the first time. Jonathan stayed here the night we went looking for that...*thing*."

"The Demogorgon," he interjected.

"Right. When I was trapped in the...Upside Down, he told me to follow the sound of his voice, and he pulled me out." She hugged her knees to her chest. "Every night I've dreamt that I'm stuck there. That's probably why I was calling out his name tonight."

Mike didn't seem wholly satisfied with her admission. "Okay. So what is it like?"

"The Upside Down?" she asked uneasily, but he shook his head.

"You and Jonathan."

"Oh." She knitted her brow. "We're just..." *'Friends'* should have been the way to complete that sentence, but even that wasn't true. "He has a lot going on, and I'm... I don't know, boy problems just don't seem as important as they used to." She didn't mention that she had only ever talked to Barb about those troubles, and she was lost without her best friend's guidance.

"But you're still with Steve." His tone was flat, but there was a question there.

"He's not a bad guy." Nancy felt like a machine programmed to recite scripted responses - ask me about Jonathan Byers, ask me about the boy I'm dating, ask me how I'm doing, and you'll get the same answer every time.

"So you really do like him?"

The sheets rustled as she turned toward him. "Why are you asking about this?"

Mike appeared at a loss for words. She knew that Eleven was weighing heavily on his mind, and maybe he was trying to figure out how older people dealt with romantic relationships. Like how seemingly easy it was to get over someone with whom you shared so much in such a short amount of time.

She should have answered more truthfully, shared some of her lingering doubts about Steve, but she remembered how simple childhood crushes used to seem, and she wasn't sure how to explain the situation to her younger brother without him telling her to just

dump Steve and start dating Jonathan. There were so many reasons why that wouldn't make sense, but she stuck with the canned reply. "It's Steve Harrington. Every girl would kill to be with him."

Mike nodded mutely and settled down into the bed, so she followed his lead, shifting onto her side to face him. Just when she thought that he had drifted off to sleep, he mumbled, "Will says that you shouldn't like things just because people say you're supposed to."

As he rolled away, Nancy laid back and stared at her ceiling. She had a feeling she knew exactly who had taught Will that lesson.

The next time it happened, it was much, much worse.

It was early February, and Steve had snuck over under the pretense of getting help with his essay on *A Doll's House*. Since they really did get some studying in, she had indulged him in spending the night.

The sky was still pitch-black as she felt the blankets getting pulled away from her, and she awoke to see him struggling to disentangle himself.

"Where are you going?" she whispered, her breath short from the sheer panic of her nightmare.

Steve sighed, pulling on his sweatshirt. "I can't do this anymore, Nance."

"Do what?"

"This," he gestured between them. "Us."

"And you decided this in the middle of the night?"

"No," he replied, too loudly, and then lowered his voice. "No...I've been thinking about this for a while."

"Do we have to do this right now?" She let out a huge yawn. In a matter of hours, she had an important chemistry test, and she had been hoping that she might sleep a little better if Steve was by her side.

"You really don't know why I'm upset?"

"Obviously not, I just woke up," she snapped. "What, did I kick you in my sleep, or—"

Realization dawned on her, showing itself on her face, and he nodded in confirmation.

"You were yelling his name. I tried to wake you up, and then you hugged me. You..." Steve closed his eyes, visibly pained. "You thought I was *him*."

"It was just a dream," she said dismissively, but he had already made up his mind.

"If that was true, then fine. But I know it isn't. It's about time you two admitted it to yourselves." He looked as tired as she felt.

"Steve." Against her wishes, her eyes began to sting as she pulled herself up to sit on the edge of her bed.

He stepped closer, leaning down to cup her cheek in his palm. "You'll be fine. You're smart and strong and...we're just not right for each other."

"I really liked you," she told him weakly, but she was already using the past tense.

"Me too." He kissed her gently and then rested his forehead against hers. A tear slid down her face, and he wiped it away with his thumb. "C'mon, we can still be friends."

She scoffed, crossing her arms and despising the fact that their relationship was ending as it had begun – like a vapid high school romantic comedy. "Are you going to tell me that you just need some space? Or you love me so much it scares you?"

Steve stood up, shoving his hands into his pockets. "I was going to go with, *I think we should see other people*," he said, trying to lighten the mood. "Look – go back to sleep. We can talk tomorrow."

If she was being honest, she had known this was coming any day

now. In fact, she had been surprised that he had held out for as long as he had. Barb's disappearance and their disagreements during that week had created cracks before their relationship even had time to become fully formed, and Nancy's ensuing grief and palpable tension with Jonathan chipped away at it even further, until there was an unassailable gulf between them.

Right as he was preparing to ease open the window, she called out, "Hey, Steve?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember the first time you noticed me?"

He paused, maybe believing it was a trick question. "I don't, uh – what do you mean?"

"Just...the first thing you remember."

"You sat in front of me in Mr. Ballard's geometry class. You were a freshman, and you got the highest grade on every test. You had braces then."

"And what did you think of me?"

"Honestly?"

"Please," she insisted.

"I thought you were kind of a geek. But that was before I got to know you—" he rushed to mention.

"It's okay. I remember when I heard that you almost set the chem room on fire last year. Comiskey said you left the lab notes you were copying next to the bunsen burner when you tried to light it."

"And you thought I was the coolest guy in school, I'm sure."

"You're an idiot, Steve Harrington," she recited wistfully.

It was his cue to reply, "*You're beautiful, Nancy Wheeler,*" but he just shook his head and pulled the window open. "Goodbye, Nancy."

With sleep out of the question, she walked over to her desk and retrieved her diary. Her pen was poised above the paper before she returned to grab her headphones as well.

Over the following few weeks, she was listening to the mixtape and writing letters to Barb daily. It was just her luck that Steve had to break up with her right before Valentine's Day. She had been expecting that this would be her first one with a boyfriend, when she would finally receive a bouquet of flowers or a giant teddy bear or something equally cheesy.

In the past, she used to go over to Barb's house, and they would stuff their faces with ice cream before dabbing their eyes with Kleenex during their marathon of sappy chick flicks. This year was supposed to be different, and it was. Just definitely not in the way she had hoped.

Watching TV with her parents seemed even more depressing than the prospect of going to the theater alone, so she made up an excuse about studying with a classmate and walked to the town square. She was squinting at the showtimes before she even realized who was working at the Hawk that Tuesday evening.

"Hey," Jonathan said, breaking her concentration.

"Hey."

"Are you meeting Steve?" he asked slowly, and she shook her head.

"No." She could feel herself growing increasingly flustered, as if this situation hadn't been degrading enough already. "No, we broke up."

"I know." He kept his gaze on her, but she couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes. She didn't want his pity. "I just thought maybe—" He cut himself off, changed course. "My shift is almost up. D'you want to..."

"Watch a movie with me?" she asked directly, because he didn't seem capable of getting the words out.

"Yeah. They're all terrible, but it might be funny."

Nancy reviewed the options again. *The Lonely Guy* didn't sound right, and *Love Letters* was something she might have seen with Barb, but definitely not with him. "What about *Reckless*?"

He gave her a cryptic look but didn't object. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll get you in. You can wait in the lobby."

Throughout the film, she kept her hands folded in her lap. Once she saw the posters, it became evident that she had made the worst possible choice – a predictable high school plot, with an antisocial protagonist who fell in love with a preppy cheerleader who was dating someone else. She snuck a glance at Jonathan during a particularly steamy scene, and he was slouched in his seat, clearly uncomfortable.

And then she had to fight the impulse to burst out laughing. The movie itself was awful, but he had been right about this being funny. She had been so miserable that she had inadvertently decided to go to the movies with the boy Steve had dumped her over. The one she had shared a bed with twice, had held hands with and kissed on the cheek.

It was Valentine's Day, and she and Jonathan Byers were on a date.

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They lasted a little over a month after his conversation with Steve, and then it was officially over.

She didn't sit with them at lunch that day – she had to study for a big chemistry test – but Steve told him everything. Well, not exactly everything. He could tell there were significant details he was leaving out, most likely concerning himself, but he caught the gist.

When Steve finished spilling his guts, he looked at Jonathan expectantly. "I think it'll be best for all of us, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure."

"I meant, I won't be in the way anymore," he said with more emphasis. *Between you and Nancy* being the implication, but Jonathan didn't know what to do with that.

“Will you be okay?” he asked, and Steve nearly choked on his sip of chocolate milk.

“Jesus. You really are a good guy, Jon. I totally got you wrong that time I kicked your ass.”

“You mean when I kicked your ass,” he corrected him, cracking a smile. No one had ever called him Jon before.

“Seriously. I told you that I just broke up with the girl that you’ve been in love with, and that you have my blessing to go after her, and you’re worried about my feelings?”

“I’m not in love with her,” he retorted, and Steve laughed again.

“Neither am I. It feels really good to admit that.” He looked happier than Jonathan had ever seen him.

It never ceased to be weird that Steve Harrington had become his closest friend. The New Year’s Eve party had proven that he hadn’t completely severed his ties with the popular crowd, even if he shunned Tommy H. and Carol. Maybe he felt that fighting a creature from another world had formed some kind of inseparable bond between them. Even after Jonathan had told him all he knew and they had rehashed it from every possible angle, he had still found reasons to talk to him – arguments with his dad, the suspense of college applications. He probably just needed someone to listen to him while he spoke out loud to sort through his feelings, to nod in understanding and give the occasional affirming comment. Jonathan was pretty good at that.

Steve still wanted to be friends with Nancy too, and she didn’t seem to have a lot of other options, so she had resigned herself to their usual lunch table. Now she had even less of a reason to talk, and Jonathan could feel her continuing to fade away. But Nancy Wheeler was the type of girl who crawled into mysterious portals without second-guessing it, who abandoned safety for a shot at revenge, and suggested building weapons over walls. She didn’t need anyone to rescue her, so he let her be.

Until Valentine’s Day. She seemed utterly dejected, dragging her feet

as she made her way to the movie theater. Before he greeted her, she had looked right through him.

It was a meaningless holiday, and he wouldn't have pegged her as the type to get worked up over it, but her best friend was dead and she was reeling from a recent breakup, so she got a pass. Not to mention the fact that her bedroom had been very pink (although she had been wearing less pastel skirts and more dark tops and jeans as of late).

In spite of Steve's encouragement, he hadn't planned on making any moves. She needed time to sort herself out, and whatever had happened between them only added to the confusion.

In that moment, however, he recognized what Nancy needed more than anything. A friend.

He started to offer to keep her company, but the words stuck in his throat. What exactly did he and Nancy *do* when they weren't trying to track down a monster who had taken their loved ones?

"Watch a movie with me?" she asked, bailing him out.

While it wasn't the ideal choice, it was convenient, and it was something he could provide that didn't cost any money. Her movie selection, on the other hand, was a disaster. Most of the other patrons were couples, and they kept themselves entertained in other ways.

The awkwardness between them must have reached a breaking point, because the only thing they could do afterward was laugh about it.

"I'm so sorry." Nancy was truly apologetic but incapable of keeping the smile off her face.

"I'm sorry I didn't bring you a dozen roses and a box of chocolates," he joked. He almost said, "a mixtape," but he caught himself just in time.

As he drove her home, he debated internally whether he should bring it up, but she seemed to be in a good mood, and he didn't want to ruin it. He even volunteered to let her choose the radio station, but she was fine with the rowdy punk music Will preferred. He tried not to read too much into that.

"Hey, Jonathan?" she said as they approached her cul-de-sac.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. Um. I know I was stupid, caring about being alone on Valentine's Day, but—"

"No one would ever call you stupid, Nancy."

That stopped her, and there were so many things either of them could say, but indecision won out.

"See you tomorrow," she said before closing the car door. They left it at that.

But that incident had proven that they could spend time together without supernatural forces or six-packs of beer, and they gradually found more excuses to hang out. Jonathan showed her the picture she had taken of him on New Year's Eve and told her she had a knack for photography. (They didn't talk about the other moments from that night, and the week in November was still a forbidden topic.) Mostly, they studied at the library after class, because it turned out that NYU was a highly selective university, and he needed to get his grades up after years of slacking.

Over the next few months, things remained purely platonic. She and Steve settled into an amicable arrangement, and all three of them even met up outside of school one night to celebrate his acceptance letter to Indiana University. By the time April rolled around, it didn't phase her when he accidentally let slip that he was planning on taking his ex-girlfriend Amy to the prom ("just as friends," he claimed). In private, he asked Jonathan whether he was going to ask Nancy, but that idea seemed so ludicrous that he didn't have to bother with a rebuttal.

Except one afternoon when she came over to his house for SAT prep, there was something on his mind that he couldn't hold in any longer. She was sitting cross-legged on his bed, sorting vocabulary flashcards into different piles when the album they were listening to ended. He was at his desk, deliberating over the next record. Then seemingly of their own volition, the words came tumbling out. "Hey, I was

wondering...one of my tapes went missing a few months ago.”

The sorting paused, Nancy holding a stack in midair. He waited for her to respond, but all the color had drained from her cheeks.

“You can keep it if you want, but—“

“No, I shouldn’t have taken it.” She stood up suddenly, a few cards cascading onto the floor. “I’ll go get it now and give it to you tomorrow at school.”

“I don’t need it back—” he said hastily, this exchange not turning out quite like he had imagined. Not that he had intended to do it right then, without any warning.

“It’s fine. I should get going anyway, I told my mom I would...” It was glaringly obvious to both of them that she hadn’t promised her mom anything, but he wasn’t going to stop her from leaving. She had driven her family’s hand-me-down station wagon that day, so she could get home on her own. “I should go,” she repeated.

“Yeah, okay.”

Scooping the flashcards into a messy pile, she slid them all into her backpack along with the SAT prep book and her handwritten notes. “See you later.”

He spent the next day dreading the fallout, but she must have gotten to school much earlier because she wasn’t by her locker in the morning. She didn’t emerge at lunch either, likely killing time in one of her classrooms. Steve made a passing remark, but Jonathan tried to act like nothing was out of the ordinary.

It wasn’t until after school, when he was deep in focus in the darkroom, that he stopped thinking about her.

Naturally, when his guard was finally down, she appeared.

“I wanted to say sorry,” she said faintly, slipping into the room and closing the door behind her.

“Hm?” He kept his eyes on the print that he was dipping into the stop

bath.

She rummaged through her book bag and produced the cassette tape. "I took it on New Year's, I don't know why—"

"It had your name on it." He pinned the photograph and turned toward her, carelessly wiping his hands on his jeans. "And I'm the one who should be apologizing for that night."

"No. You don't have to—"

"It was embarrassing. I drank too much, and I acted stupid, and the taste made me sick."

"Yeah, you were...*different*," she declared, and they couldn't help but laugh. It was a major understatement. "It wasn't all bad. You seemed happier. Talkative."

"Oh." It was a lame filler response, and he set his jaw, steeling himself to say more. It was a lot more difficult to do this while sober. "I was just saying stuff without thinking. Not worrying about everything that might happen."

"You should do that more." And then, seeming to realize how that sounded, she added, "Not drink alcohol, I mean – but...you know. Speak your mind."

"I've never been good at that." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess that's why I like music. It says what I can't."

He glanced at her sideways, and it felt like he was moving in slow motion, at odds with the rate of his heart pounding against his chest.

"Keep the tape," he told her. "If you really liked it, I mean."

"I will. I do." Her cheeks flushed, but she tried to hide it while stuffing the tape back into her bag.

As she was turning to go, he supposed it was now or never, and he blurted out, "You still are."

She looked at him quizzically.

"It's what I should have said that night – after '*I thought you were pretty.*' You still are."

"I didn't think you remembered that," she admitted, momentarily stunned.

"Of course. You said you thought I was smart, and that I still am. So I should have said that."

Her wide-eyed expression changed to one of mental preparation, like she was about to slice her palm with a kitchen knife. And then she dropped her bag and flung herself at him, pressing her lips to his.

He was too startled to do anything for a moment. When she parted her mouth, he kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her. He had never done it before, but it didn't seem to matter – it wasn't how he imagined it would be. (Of course he had imagined it). He always thought that they'd be shy, take it slow. Maybe she'd caress his hand again, like when she wrapped the bandage around it, and then he'd work up the nerve to kiss her.

But this – this felt frenzied, and she was pulling at his t-shirt like he was the only thing keeping her rooted there. She pushed against him until he backed into the table, causing the container of liquid to slosh noisily. Somehow, that detail reminded them of their environment, of the fact that any of their classmates could walk in at any time.

They pulled apart like they had been burned and stared at each other, a thousand emotions flitting through their eyes in a split-second – shock, exhilaration, bemusement, desire – and then Nancy turned on her heel and practically ran for the door.

"I'm sorry," she told him as she exited.

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She regretted it as soon as she finished dialing the number, but at that point, it was too late to back out.

Once she had holed herself up in her bedroom, she found herself starting letters of explanation to Barb and then scribbling over

embarrassing lines and tearing the pages out in frustration. Writing about it wasn't going to be enough this time, especially when it was to someone incapable of responding.

What she really needed was advice. Her mom always wanted to help, but she didn't truly understand what they had experienced in November. And while her younger brother got that part, talking about their love lives was out of the question.

Only one person could grasp the complexity of the situation.

"Hello?" Mrs. Harrington answered, already sounding impatient. When Nancy spoke, his mother's voice softened, changed to one of mild interest before she shouted, "Steve! Nancy's on the phone!"

Nancy looped the turquoise cord around her finger as she waited for him to pick up and to hear the click on the other line, ensuring that it was just the two of them.

"Nancy? What's going on?"

He sounded confused and slightly concerned, as though the only reason she could have to call him was in an emergency. Which, although not in the sense of faceless monsters tearing through holes between dimensions, this sort of was.

"I didn't know who else to call," she began, because lately she only spoke in trite phrases. "This is – I shouldn't even be telling you this, but..."

"What happened?"

After considerable pause, Nancy clenched her fist around the receiver and divulged, "Jonathan and I kissed."

There was a moment of silence in which she struggled to picture his reaction on the other end.

And then the sound of laughter rang out.

"It's not funny," she shot back.

"No, that's not why I was laughing. It's about damn time."

"What?"

She could see him now, shaking his head in exasperation. "Come on, Nancy. Only you two would drag it out for this long. Every day at lunch with you two feels like a middle school dance."

Nancy couldn't argue with that. From what she'd overheard from Dustin, Lucas and Will's conversations (Mike had refused to attend, pretending that he had the flu), the Snow Ball was still the same as it had been years ago – boys hanging around by the walls on one side of the gymnasium, and girls swaying to the music with each other on the other side, with zero interaction between the two sexes. That sounded like the level at which Jonathan and she had been skirting around their feelings. She might as well have asked a classmate to pass him a note: *"Do you like me? Circle one: yes or no."*

"So you're not...?"

"What, mad? Jealous? A few months ago, yeah. I hated it. But I told you, everyone saw this coming except for you two. How'd it happen anyway?"

"I – I don't..." she faltered. It had been one thing to tell Steve it had even occurred, but she didn't feel comfortable going into the details.

"You kissed him," he deduced. "And now you've convinced yourself that it was a mistake."

"Yes."

"Okay, look – you like him, don't you?"

Talking to Steve about this was nothing like her daily phone calls with Barb. Barb would have listened thoughtfully without interrupting, and Nancy would have felt comfortable sharing every thought on her mind, every emotion she felt. Steve was much more direct. Though it was off-putting, it wasn't unhelpful – it would just take some getting used to.

"I'm going to take that as a yes. I know for a fact that he likes you. So

what's the problem?"

"You *know* that," she stated doubtfully.

"He never said it in those words, but anyone could see it. And so can you. Don't be an idiot, Nancy Wheeler."

Her lips curled into a smile. "Got it. Thanks, Steve."

"Any time. How could I resist the opportunity to teach Miss 3.999 GPA something she doesn't know?"

"Bye," she said, rolling her eyes in amusement before hanging up.

Since her mom had taken the car to run errands with Holly, Nancy walked all the way to the edge of the woods. At each house she passed, she thought of turning back, but once she had trudged down the hill, she made up her mind that she was past the point of no return. The rest of the way there, she tried to sort out what to say, rehearsing lines in her head and visualizing his reaction.

Heading back to the Byers' home bombarded her with memories, but this time, they didn't paralyze her. Confronting Jonathan about a kiss didn't even register in the same universe as what they had gone through before. Fear hadn't stopped her then. Even when Jonathan tried to let her off the hook, she had refused to back down, pointed the gun multiple times that night, and fired every round.

She liked how he had been so calm and measured, had gone over every detail with her until they could recite the plan in turns. Not only that, she liked *herself* more when she had been around him. Emboldened. Empowered.

Nancy from that week didn't care about finding the perfect top or waiting all weekend for a boy to call her. Once she had found out what she was capable of, why had she bothered to go back to her former self?

In no time at all, she was standing on his porch.

Chester barked until the door opened, and Jonathan stood in front of her hesitantly. "Hey. Do you – uh, want to come in?"

“How about a walk?” she proposed instead.

He nodded, and they made their way around to the backyard, past the toolshed and through the clearing where they had practiced shooting cans (and the spaces between). She made a quip about it, both of them aware that it was the first time they were acknowledging it since the fall. Back then, their boots had crunched over fallen leaves, but now their sneakers trod noiselessly on a carpet of grass and wildflowers. They were heading into new territory, unfamiliar and anxiety-inducing in a different way.

But the dam had burst with Nancy’s comment, and everything came spilling out after that. As they reached Castle Byers, Jonathan confessed his worry that something was still wrong with Will. His chronic cough had prevented them all from getting a full night’s sleep in months. This led her to describe her recurring nightmares, including the one where he saved her. She told him that the mixtape helped.

“I’m glad. I mean, I made them for my brother all the time, so I thought I could make you one. But then I realized that would be weird.”

“What’s the weirdest part?” she asked, a smile spreading across her face. “You or the mixtape?”

“Me.” He didn’t miss a beat. “Definitely me.”

He shared that he had been thinking of a graduation gift for Steve and that he could use her help. He planned to put together an album with photos of Hawkins and maybe some of them, if possible. In exchange for all the tutoring help she had given him, he offered to teach her about photography. While she waved off the first part, a new hobby couldn’t hurt. It wasn’t ballet, but taking pictures was a good outlet for creative expression.

“Oh yeah, speaking of Steve...” She relayed her impulsive phone call, how she had been so frantic for guidance that she had involved her ex-boyfriend. In turn, Jonathan revealed that Steve had been nudging him to act ever since the breakup.

“Great, I’ve been waiting for you to ask me to the prom,” she teased.

“Actually, I thought we could see a movie. Something to take our minds off everything. How about *Sixteen Candles*?”

She laughed and then bit her lip. “Why *didn’t* you ask me out?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t think you needed to be with anyone to be happy.”

“I didn’t *need* to be with anyone,” she agreed. “But I wanted to be with you.”

She stopped in her tracks, turning to face him.

“What did you want?”

It seemed like he couldn’t find the right words, so he didn’t say anything. She should have expected that.

But then he stepped forward, bending down to kiss her.

It was softer, not at all like her attack in the darkroom. He brought his hands up to frame her face, and she laid hers flat against his chest.

“Oh,” was all she could say afterwards.

All too soon, the sun was starting to set.

Jonathan drove her home, and when Will’s mixtape ended, he switched on the radio. “Let’s Dance” was playing, so he turned it up. Nancy smiled at him, and for once, it was a comfortable silence.

As he pulled into her driveway, she found herself unwilling to leave his car, but both their families expected them for dinner. Eventually, she left with the promise that he would return that night.

When he tapped on her window a few hours later, she was finishing up her diary entry. At the top, she had written the date and launched straight into her retelling of the day’s events. Somehow, she hadn’t felt the compulsion to address it this time.

Jonathan stumbled into her room as the mixtape had reached the penultimate track.

“Who is this?” she asked in a hushed tone, pulling the window shut.

“Joy Division. Do you like them?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered truthfully.

“Well, I should go,” he replied, half-smiling.

She pulled him into a hug, and it felt every bit as reassuring as she had remembered. And when they climbed into her bed, they were back on the right sides. This time, she didn't have to feel ashamed to think that.

The mixtape was drawing to a close as they laid down next to each other, and Jonathan responded to her unspoken concern.

“Don’t worry,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze. “I’m right here.”

For the first time in months, Nancy fell into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.